

‘Medium, knowledge, structure: capacities for choice and the contradiction of medium-specificity in games and comics.’

SG: In 2012, Pantheon Books published an unusual work by Chris Ware.

Entitled *Building Stories*, the work comprised ‘14 distinctively discrete Books, Booklets, Magazines, Newspapers and Pamphlets’, all enclosed within a large cardboard box.¹ In reviews of *Building Stories*, critics regularly draw attention to the board-game like design of the comic’s box and elements of the text within.² Yet while many have noted the similarities between *Building Stories* and the visual/physical design of board games such as Monopoly, and Ware himself has cited ‘French “Jeux Reunis” game sets from the late 19th and the early 20th century’ as one of the inspirations for the work’s design concept, few go as far as to suggest that *Building Stories* actually is a game.³

The work does, however, have qualities that suggest a structural (rather than just visual) connection to games: the fourteen items can be read in any order, implying a level of freedom far greater than most books’ suggestions of a straightforward front to back approach, and perhaps indicating the possibility of a work to be “played” as much as a work to be “read,” the possibility of choice here arguably casting the reader as a “player”. That the “shape” of the whole and the experiences of the narrative can be changed by different readings is another indication that there may be an element of game-like structures within the work, since games are by their very nature profoundly affected by the ways in which they are played.

In this paper, we will explore some of these connections and consider whether the narrative structures that can be found in *Building Stories* bear anything more than a passing resemblance to the narrative structures found in games. To do so, we will employ and build upon Seymour Chatman’s notion of narrative as a “double time” as a starting point to explore how plots are structured in *Building Stories* and **a selection of other works** including selected video games from Bethesda Softworks and Marc Saporta’s prose novel *Composition No.1*.

1 Ware, Chris. 2012. *Building Stories*. **LOCATION**: Pantheon Books. Box cover.

2 See, for example, the starred *Booklist* review here: <http://www.amazon.com/Building-Stories-Chris-Ware/dp/0375424334>, the *New York Times* review here: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/books/review/building-stories-by-chris-ware.html?_r=0 and the *Guardian* review here: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/21/building-stories-chris-ware-review>.

3 See Hugh Hart’s interview with Ware here: <http://www.fastcocreate.com/1681628/chris-ware-brilliantly-bundles-building-stories-as-graphic-novel-boxed-set>.

II: CHATMAN ON NARRATIVE

IH: In his article 'What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)' Seymour Chatman **argues that:**

A salient property of narrative is double time structuring. That is, all narratives, in whatever medium, combine the time sequence of plot events, the time of the *histoire* ("story-time") with the time of the presentation of those events in the text, which we call "discourse-time". What is fundamental to narrative, regardless of medium, is that these two time orders are independent.⁴

He goes on to demonstrate this independence in writing on Jean Renoir's short film 'Une Partie de campagne' [A Country Excursion] and the short story by Maupassant that underlies it, noting of the short story **that there is a**

'disparity between the story order and discourse order: story order is A, B, C, D; discourse order is A, C, B, D'. **The order of events can be quite different from the order of telling.** We should note here that Chatman's use of the term 'discourse' differs considerably from other narrative theorists, even that used by his major influence, Emile Benveniste, since Chatman does not use the term expansively to include the relationship between text and reader, but only to describe the way in which the text is structured by the narrator.

III: EXPANDING ON CHATMAN

SG: Chatman's account of narrative is useful. However, in *Building Stories*, we can see at least three different temporal categories, rather than the two categories that Chatman describes.

The first, which Chatman would call "story-time" can be seen in the narrative about the unnamed female protagonist's life, and the order in which the events in this life take place as they are ordered chronologically.

The second strand of "time" in *Building Stories* constitutes Chatman's "discourse-time". This is the narrator's order of telling. The story-time described above is not expressed linearly or completely in *Building Stories*, **as this page shows.**

Here we see re-orderings of the story-time: **the panel we have outlined in blue**, for example, takes place before **the panel we have outlined in red** in the story time, but comes after it on the page. The order of presentation of the events is not the same as the order of occurrence of those same events.

Although Chatman defines discourse as only the manner and order of telling, the experience of reading *Building Stories* broadens discourse to include another temporal category, "user-time",

a conception of which is central to our discussion of games. In *Building Stories*, user-time is very explicitly built into the structure and shape of the text, and comprises the

⁴ Chatman, Seymour, 'What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa),' *Critical Enquiry* 7:1 (1980), 121-140. 118.

order of events as the user experiences them. Since the reader has a choice regarding the order in which the fourteen components of *Building Stories* are read, they can again **reorder the text in a way over which Ware has no control**.

This principle implies ways in which the present situation of reading and viewing bears directly upon the structure and meaning of a plot, although the general principle cannot account for the variety of types of this relationship. For example, the plots of conventionally constructed novels require an agreed way of reading (front to back). Reading them in another way renders their plots incoherent. Most graphic novels also follow this prescription. What is unusual about *Building Stories* is the way in which user-time and user-determined orders of reading are actively and explicitly incorporated into the work itself. This perhaps indicates that *Building Stories* is in fact a game, but before we come down on one side or the other of this idea, it is important to think a little about plot and games.

IV: PLOT IN GAMES

IH: In games, user-time plays a major role. Our own discussions about plot began with an examination of games produced by Bethesda Softworks using Chatman's two categories, and led to some illuminating engagements with plots in games and literature, which we believe can help us to understand comics such as *Building Stories*.

In this research, we have limited our discussion to a couple of Bethesda's games: *Skyrim* (2011) from *The Elder Scrolls* series and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010).

Both of these games use similar play mechanics; specifically, they take place in vast "open worlds" that allow players to walk freely around and encounter challenges, obstacles and tasks in any order they choose. With a few exceptions, players are not required to complete tasks they do not wish to. As this description indicates, player choice has a major role in the Bethesda games; user-time and user determined orders are foregrounded. But what of story-time and discourse-time?

In the Bethesda games, we would suggest, Chatman's story-time and discourse-time exist, but they are not separable: what is told and the order in which it is told are identical. Both take place in the present. Although there are pre-existing conditions in the games (for what could potentially happen according to the rules and physical systems of the game), there is no pre-existing plot. The plot only develops as the game is played.

In games, this elision of "story time", "discourse time" and "user time" has profound implications for the definition of narration and indeed the identification of the whole utterance. As opposed to the linguistic utterance, the game 'utterance' constitutes the entire poesis of the game in which every design and production aspect of the game text can be considered as an event in the plot, including visual appearance, sound and movement, on one hand generalised as a complete diegesis and on the other only ever partially revealed to the player in the course of a singular development of play: the emergence of a unique combination of situations and actions.

V: IS *BUILDING STORIES* A GAME?

SG: This specifically 'gaming' structure can also be found in printed narratives, and if we look at a precursor to *Building Stories*' "book in a box" model, **Marc Saporta's 1962 novel *Composition No.1***, we can see one example of this.

Composition No.1 is a yellow cardboard box containing one hundred and fifty loose, unnumbered sheets of paper. Each sheet presents a short section of narrative in prose format, and the sheets can be read in any order. Like *Building Stories*, the box here serves to suggest a degree of completeness to the work; the relationships between the one hundred and fifty sheets is crucial, just as the relationships between the fourteen elements of *Building Stories* is.

Composition No.1 behaves similarly to the Bethesda games in the ways in which its narrative plays out. Each sheet of paper is written in the present tense, and none of them have a strictly determinable relationship to any of the others, although they are not completely unrelated as characters do recur across sheets. This means that as in the Bethesda games, Chatman's story-time and the discourse-time are collapsed into each other, and both are subordinated to user-time since the order in which things occur is determined by the order in which they are read. We can therefore argue that the structure of narrative in games is *not* unique to computer games, and that in some cases it is possible to see direct similarities between games and written texts. In fact, we would go as far as to suggest that *Composition No.1* is a game.

Games also focus attention on the relationship between the time of play and what remains (or will always remain) un-revealed in the plot and hence unknown by the player. Distinct from the habits of reading literary fiction in which, to complete the book, a reader gains a complete knowledge of the text, in *Composition No. 1*, the plot constitutes a selection of known experiences including the knowledge that other, unknown, plot combinations are and have been available. To complete the game does not require complete knowledge of the poesis of the game. The narrator is experienced by the player as a burgeoning motive force, for which what remains untold is a prerequisite of telling. "Discourse time", in the case of games, is characterised by the presence of remaindered, unknown, un-produced but prepared plots constituting a whole poesis.

Whereas in the Bethesda games and *Composition No.1* there are conditions but no pre-existing plot, in *Building Stories* the plot *is* pre-established. No matter which order the reader takes the fourteen objects in, the story-time is fixed. The number of possible readings of *Building Stories* is significantly fewer than *Composition No.1*, but is still a very high number in real terms (over 87 billion) and it is statistically unlikely that any two readers will read the book in the same order without consciously trying to do so.⁵ Nevertheless, *Building Stories* does not work in the same way as *Composition No.1* because no matter how many different ways in which it is possible to read the book, the story time is fixed. In the Bethesda games and *Composition No.1* the events of the story time change according to the order of playing or reading. The reading or playing order determines both what happens, and

5 [87,178,291,200; 87 billion, 178 million, 291 thousand, 200.](#)

the causal relationships between events. It is not simply a matter of retelling the same story in a different order.

VI: WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

IH: Even if we do not class *Building Stories* as a game, its form illuminates the relationship between narrating and use. Indeed, it is inarguable that *Building Stories* allows choice, in that the reader does choose how the plot is presented to them, but what is notable is the lack of impact that the choices the reader makes have upon the plot.

In games plots that emerge co-temporally with narration and that are not predetermined are common, and there are numerous examples of this type of narrative structure beyond the Bethesda games. Production-oriented choice-based narratives are less common in other areas, but they are not absolutely unique to [things that are conventionally identified as](#) games, as *Composition No.1* demonstrates.

SLIDE EIGHTEEN: comparison of narratives etc (CLICKS AT BOLD TEXT)

The differentiation between games and productions in which plot is pre-determined offers a number of benefits for the study of narratives in general. The identification of these **broader narrative structuring systems allows us to compare narratives across media**. The continued growth of transmedia narratives is one area that would benefit particularly from the possibility of such comparisons, since they enable us to understand the different constraints and affordances that multimedia and transmedia forms offer. Second, our differentiation allows for a more precise understanding of **the nature of choice in narrative**, and the possibilities for choice to have impacts. It also lets us better comprehend the power relations at work between the various “choosers” involved in narratives: our understandings of the relationships between authors and readers, for example, are nuanced by this approach. Finally, and more specifically in relation to comics, this approach offers a means for dealing with those **comics where user choice and the possibility for a reorganisation of elements of the plot is brought into play in an explicit fashion**.

Building Stories is one high profile example of this type of work, but there are numerous others, including **the 2000AD spin-off Dice Man comics**,..

Jason Shiga’s *Meanwhile* and...

Daniel Merlin Goodbrey’s “game comics”, examples of which would include *A Duck Has an Adventure*, *Icarus Needs* and *Dice With the Universe*.

What is of interest is [the](#) impact that “user-time” choices have upon narrative structure. *Building Stories* suggests that the reader is an active participant in the production of the story but, as we have demonstrated, this is not the case. Conversely, *Skyrim* and *Composition No.1* afford plots that users produce through partially-known narrated worlds that have so much diegetic variety that to speak of any one plot is impossible.

However, in both games and productions that creatively utilise the formal and discursive characteristics of games, to ascribe the function of narrator to player requires a theoretical reconfiguring of the function of the narrator in the game poesis, relative to a revised conception of utterance rather than the status of a plot. To use a vocal analogy, games players meaningfully speak new sentences using a language of the narrator's devising whereas readers of a novel repeat them or, to return to Seymour Chatman, players conflate "user time" with a "story time" that they can never fully know.

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